A TYPOLOGY OF CONSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENTS

PHILIP BOBBITT, THE MODALITIES OF CONSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENT


I will be speaking of constitutional modalities—the ways in which legal propositions are characterized as true from a constitutional point of view. ** ** [The] six modalities of constitutional argument are: the historical (relying on the intentions of the framers and ratifiers of the Constitution); textual (looking to the meaning of the words of the Constitution alone, as they would be interpreted by the average contemporary "man on the street"); structural (inferring rules from the relationships that the Constitution mandates among the structures it sets up); doctrinal (applying rules generated by precedent); ethical (deriving rules from those moral commitments of the American ethos that are reflected in the Constitution); and prudential (seeking to balance the costs and benefits of a particular rule). Now let us look at some examples, and a somewhat more formal statement of each form of argument.

Consider the question whether a state may validly enforce a law that makes it a crime to procure an abortion. An historical modality may be attributed to constitutional arguments that claim that the framers and
ratiﬁers of the Fourteenth Amendment intended, or did not intend, or that it cannot be ascertained whether it was their intention, to protect pregnant women from a state’s coercion, through threats of ﬁnes and imprisonment, to bear children. Similarly, an historical modality might approach the abortion question as: did the framers and ratiﬁers of the Fourteenth Amendment intend to countenance, or to overturn by means of the Amendment, or are their intentions unclear as to the effect of the Amendment regarding, those state laws that existed at the time of ratiﬁcation that prohibited abortions?

Oftentimes this modality is confused with textual argument since both can have reference to the speciﬁc text of the Constitution. Histori-
cal, or “originalist” approaches to construing the text, however, are distinctive in their reference back to what a particular provision is thought to have meant to its ratiﬁers. Thus, when Justice Taney in the Dred Scott case was called upon to construe the scope of the diversity jurisdiction in Article III, which provides for suits “between citizens of the several states,” so that he might decide whether a slave could seek his freedom in a diversity suit before a federal court, he wrote:

It becomes necessary to determine who were the citizens of the several states when the constitution was adopted. And in order to do this we must recur to the governments and institutions of the colonies. We must inquire who at the time were recognized as citizens of the states, whose rights and liberties [had been] outraged by the English government and who declared their independence and assumed the powers of government to defend their rights [by force] of arms. We refer to these historical facts for the purpose of showing the fixed opinions concerning the Negro race upon which the statesmen of that day spoke and acted.7

Now consider the same question—who are the “citizens” of the phrase that provides for suits in federal court “between citizens of different states” (“diversity” suits)—from another point of view. A textual modality may be attributed to arguments that the text of the Constitution would, to the average person, appear to declare, or deny, or be too vague to say whether, a suit between a black American citizen resident in a state and a white American citizen resident in another state, is a “controversy between citizens of different states.” I would imagine that the contemporary meaning of these words is rather different than that which Taney found them to mean to the framers and ratiﬁers of 1789. One should not be tempted to conclude, however, that textual approaches are inevitably more progressive than originalist approaches. Sometimes the text can be a straitjacket, conﬁning the judge to language that would have been different if its drafters had foreseen later events. Thus consider whether wiretapping is prohibited by the Fourth Amendment, which guarantees “the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures.” Here is Chief Justice Taft in a case in which

The amendment itself [he says] shows that the search is to be of material things—the person, the house, his papers or his effects. The amendment does not forbid what was done here for there was no seizure. The evidence was secured by the sense of hearing and that only. There was not entry of the houses. The language of the amendment cannot be extended and expanded.\textsuperscript{9}

By contrast, a later court had no trouble finding that wiretapping came within the Amendment. It simply relied upon historical argument—the intentions that animated the adoption of the amendment—and concluded that:

The purpose of the \ldots Fourth Amendment [is] to keep the state out of constitutionally protected areas until it has reason to believe that a specific crime has been or is being committed.\textsuperscript{10}

Consider another constitutional question: can a court issue a subpoena (or should it enjoin some other subpoena) for the disclosure of the President's working notes and diaries? To say that the institutional relationships promulgated by the Constitution require or are incompatible with or tolerate a particular answer to this question is to use a structural mode of argument. There are many recent, celebrated examples of this form of argument to be found in the cases of the US Supreme Court; indeed the 1980s were particularly notable for the Court's focus on structural issues. But structural argument is hardly a recent invention. \textit{McCulloch v. Maryland}, the principal foundation case for constitutional analysis, relies almost wholly on structural approaches. In determining whether a Maryland tax on the Federal Bank of the United States could be enforced, Chief Justice Marshall studiedly refuses to specify the particular text that supports his argument, and explicitly rejects reliance on historical arguments, preferring instead to state the rationale on inferences for the structure of federalism. Such a structure could not be maintained, he concluded, if the states, whose officials are elected by a state's constituency, could tax the agencies of the federal government present in a state and thereby tax a nationwide constituency. The constitutional structure would not tolerate such a practice.

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Structural arguments are a little less intuitively obvious than arguments from the text or history of the Constitution, so perhaps it would be well to briefly outline their characteristic form. Usually, arguments in this modality are straightforward: first, an uncontroversial statement about a constitutional structure is introduced [for example, \* \* \* the statement that the right to vote for a member of Congress is provided for in the Constitution]; second, a relationship is inferred from this structure [that this right, for example, gives rise to the federal power to

\textsuperscript{9} Olmstead v. United States, 277 U.S. 438, 464 (1928).

protect it and is not dependent on state protection]; third, a factual assertion about the world is made [that, if unprotected, the structure of federal representation would be at the mercy of local violence]. Finally a conclusion is drawn that provides the rule in the case. * * *

Consider whether the state can require mandatory testing for the AIDSvirus antibodies. To say that it is wise, or unwise, or simply unclear on the present facts whether or not it is wise to permit such testing is to propose an evaluation from a prudential point of view. In the first half of this century, this mode of constitutional argument was principally associated with doctrines that sought to protect the political position of the courts. But the dramatic national crises of depression and world war soon provided ample reason to introduce the practical effects of constitutional doctrine into the rationales underpinning doctrine. For example, one such case arose when, in the depths of the midwestern farm depression, the Minnesota legislature passed a statute providing that anyone who was unable to pay a mortgage could be granted a moratorium from foreclosure. On its face such a statute not only appeared to realize the fears of the framers that state legislatures would compromise the credit market by enacting debtor relief statutes, but also plainly to violate the Contracts Clause that was the textual outcome of such concerns. Moreover, the structure of national economic union strongly counseled against permitting states to protect their constituents by exploding a national recovery program that depended on restoring confidence to banking operations. Nevertheless the Supreme Court upheld the statute, observing that:

An emergency existed in Minnesota which furnished a proper occasion for the exercise of the reserved power of the state to protect the vital interests of the community.16

Very simply, the Court recognized the political expediency of the legislature’s action and acquiesced in it. * * *

[P]rudential argument * * * is by no means confined to the extremes a nation undergoes in emergencies. Of course in such circumstances prudential arguments are likeliest to be decisive. But, as one of prudentialism’s most eloquent practitioners argued, such an approach has a place in every decision:

The accomplished fact, affairs and interests that have formed around it, and perhaps popular acceptance of it—these are elements * * * that may properly enter into a decision * * *, and they may also enter into the shaping of the judgment, the applicable principle itself.18

Prudential argument is actuated by facts, as these play into political and economic policies as to which the Constitution is itself agnostic. The legal rule to be applied is derived from a calculus of costs and benefits, when the facts are taken into account. Accordingly, this often

gives rise to a "balancing test" (the balance being a scales, not a tightrope.)

By contrast, when we say that a neutral, general principle derived from the caselaw construing the Constitution should apply, does not apply or may apply, we make an appeal in a doctrinal mode. * * *

To familiarize oneself with this form of argument, let us take up this question: to what extent can a state constitutionally aid parochial schools? Suppose, for example, that parochial school students whose schools are not on the route of free public school buses are given a cash allowance by the state to provide for their transportation. Does this offend the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment because the state is bearing the burdens of costs that would otherwise be borne by churchmembers, in much the way that the government in Great Britain, a country that has an established church, provides funds to supplement the income of the Church of England? A judge confronting such a case would probably begin, not by reading the text of the First Amendment which states a rule in rather general terms but by turning to precedent to find similar cases in which authoritative decisions would govern the present one. Not surprisingly, in the area of Establishment jurisprudence there is a great deal of constitutional doctrine, developed in many cases. The standards these cases develop and apply can be stated as legal rules; the case "on point"—that is, whose facts are similar in those aspects that are relevant to the legal question being posed—is probably 

*Everson v. Board of Education*, which sustained the power of local authorities to provide free transportation for children attending church schools. In *Everson* the Supreme Court treated the provision of transportation as a form of public welfare legislation, noting that it was being extended by the state "to all its citizens without regard to their religious belief." The Court wrote:

It is undoubtedly true that children are helped to get to church schools. There is even a possibility that some of the children might not be sent to the church schools if the parents were compelled to pay their children's bus fares out of their pockets when transportation to a public school would have been paid for by the State.  

Transportation, however, benefited the child in the same way as did police protection at crossings, fire protection, connections for sewage disposal, public highways, and sidewalks. Based on this rationale, subsequent cases have developed a three-pronged test: does the state program have a secular purpose; is its principal effect neither to advance nor inhibit religion; does its administration excessively entangle the state in religious affairs?  

Applying this test to the question above, the judge might write: "*Everson* must be distinguished from the instant case because the program in *Everson* provided transportation common to all students,

21. [330 U.S. 1, 17 (1947).]  
whereas here only some students—the parochial ones—are given cash allowances. While we do not question that the legislature had a secular purpose in mind, we think the evidence indicated that the effect of these allowances was in fact to make the parochial schools more attractive to parents than their secular counterparts, and thereby advance the cause of religious institutions. Moreover, the oversight required of the state to ensure that the allowances are in fact spent on providing a system of parochial school transportation intrudes the administrative apparatus of the state into the affairs of the church schools. This can only lead to the interference with budgets and an insistence on allocations for transportation that will excessively entangle the state in the administration of church affairs. Accordingly the program must be held unconstitutional."

Or a judge might write: "Everson, which also involved public transportation to parochial school students, governs this case. Here as there, the state's program provides aid to students and their parents, and not—as in cases that have applied Everson and struck down state assistance in this area—direct assistance to church-related schools. Its secular purpose, to provide school transportation at greater efficiency and less cost to the state than expanding its own bus fleets, is apparent. Like school lunches, public health services, and secular textbooks, the transportation provided here confers a benefit on the parochial student that is at parity with what the secular student receives. Thus its effect is neither to advance nor inhibit religion, but rather to avoid exacting a penalty from the parochial student. Finally, whatever state management is required to administer the program will be limited to the oversight of transportation; such involvement as there may be need not, therefore, excessively entangle the state in those religious matters with regard to which it has no role."

In either case, the hypothetical judge has applied a rule derived from the relevant caselaw. The rule is neutral as to the parties; that is, it applies equally to Catholics and Jews and atheist claimants and does not vary depending on who is bringing or defending the suit. And the rule is general, that is, it applies to all cases in which the state is arguably giving assistance to religious institutions, and is not confined to the facts of the original case that gave birth to the rule. One more point, however, should be made about this modality: its operation is not confined to the application of stare decisis, that is, the strict adherence to previously decided cases. On the contrary, in the American system one of the principles of doctrinalism is that the Supreme Court may reverse the relevant precedent. This would appear to follow from the family of modalities—that provide alternative legal rules—and the supremacy of the Constitution to the acts of government (including, of course, the judicial branch). The Court is entitled, indeed obligated, to overrule itself when it is persuaded that a particular precedent was wrongly decided and should not be applied.

Finally, let us consider the modality of ethical argument. This form of argument denotes an appeal to those elements of the American
cultural ethos that are reflected in the Constitution. The fundamental American constitutional ethos is the idea of limited government, the presumption of which holds that all residual authority remains in the private sphere. Thus when we argue that a particular constitutional conclusion is obliged by, or permitted, or forbidden by the American ethos that has allocated certain decisions to the individual or to private institutions, we are arguing in an ethical mode.

Ethical arguments arise as a consequence of the fundamental constitutional arrangement by which rights, in the American system, can be defined as those choices beyond the power of government to compel. Thus structural and ethical arguments share some similarities, as each is essentially an inferred set of arguments. Like structural arguments, ethical arguments do not depend on the construction of any particular piece of text, but rather on the necessary relationships that can be inferred from the overall arrangement expressed in the text. Structural argument infers rules from the powers granted to governments; ethical argument, by contrast, infers rules from the powers denied to government. The principal error one can make regarding ethical argument is to assume that any statute or executive act is unconstitutional if it causes effects that are incompatible with the American cultural ethos. This equates ethical argument, a constitutional form, with moral argument generally.

Let us review a hypothetical example that shows the basic pattern of ethical argument. Note that while the American cultural ethos may encompass cheeseburgers, rock and roll, and a passion for Japanese electronics, the American constitutional ethos is largely confined to the reservation of powers not delegated to a limited government.

It was recently reported that a state judge in South Carolina had given the choice of thirty-year prison sentences or castration to three convicted sex offenders. Suppose a convicted man accepted the bargain and was released on probation terms that incorporated this pledge (as by drug-induced impotence). Then suppose that he ceased taking the prescribed drug. If his probation were revoked, a constitutional challenge to the terms of his probation might take this form:

1. The reservation to the individual of the decision to have children is deeply rooted in the American notion of autonomy; there is no express constitutional power to implement a program of eugenics.

2. Moreover, such programs are not a conventionally appropriate means to any express power.

3. Those means denied the federal government are also denied the states.

4. The South Carolina sentence amounted to ordering a man to comply with a eugenics scheme that deemed him ineligible to procreate.
The element of the American ethos at stake is the reservation to individuals and families of the freedom to make certain kinds of decisions. Similar sorts of arguments are to be found in cases in which a state attempted to bar schools from teaching foreign languages; 28 in which a state passed a compulsory education act requiring every school-age child to attend public school (that is, implicitly outlawing private schools); 27 in which a local zoning ordinance was applied to prohibit a grandmother from living with her grandchildren; 28 in which a hospital sought authority to amputate a gangrenous limb from an elderly man who refused his consent; 29 in which a man allegedly suffering from delusions (but concededly harmless) was confined to a mental hospital for almost twenty-five years without treatment. 30 One may test one's mastery of this form of argument by taking each of these examples and stating an ethical argument to resolve it, e.g., (1) There is no express constitutional power to monopolize education; (2) Moreover, a statute outlawing private education is not an appropriate means to any express power (such as regulating commerce or providing for armed forces); (3) The decision to educate one's children privately or parochially or publicly is reserved to the family; (4) A statute compelling attendance exclusively at public schools amounts to a scheme to coerce families into a particular educational choice and destroy private educational options.

These then are the six modalities of constitutional argument in the United States. Each of these forms of argument can be used to construct an ideology, a set of political and practical commitments whose values are internally consistent and can be distinguished, externally, from competing ideologies. * * * The reader should not conclude that, because of this relationship—because, for example, some persons may believe that one particular modality represents the only legitimate means of interpreting the Constitution (e.g., historical argument) since it is verifiable by a resort to materials (e.g., the intentions of the ratifiers) that are mandated according to a particular political theory of interpretation (e.g., "originalism")—the modalities of argument are no more than instrumental, rhetorical devices to be deployed in behalf of various political ideologies. The modalities of constitutional argument are the ways in which law statements in constitutional matters are assessed; standing alone they assert nothing about the world. But they need only stand alone to provide the means for making constitutional argument.

There is no constitutional legal argument outside these modalities. Outside these forms, a proposition about the U.S. constitution can be a fact, or be elegant, or be amusing or even poetic, and although such assessments exist as legal statements in some possible legal world, they are not actualized in our legal world.